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A SERMON

42

The True Presbyterian Doctrine of the Church.

A SERMON PREACHED IN

The Brick Church

AT THE

ORDINATION OF ELDERS AND DEACONS,

December 18th, 1892,

BY

HENRY VAN DYKE, D.D.,
PASTOR.

New York:
WM. C. MARTIN PRINTING HOUSE, 111 JOHN STREET.
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J H Russell
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NEW YORK, *December 19th, 1892.*

DEAR DR. VAN DYKE:

The undersigned, members of the congregation of the Brick Church, believe that your sermon of yesterday should reach a larger audience, and therefore respectfully request a copy for publication.

In these days, when the constitution of our Church and the requirements of admission to our Communion are frequently misunderstood or misrepresented, we consider your clear, simple, and truthful statement of "The True Presbyterian Doctrine of the Church" very timely and profitable.

We are,

Very respectfully yours,

BENJAMIN F. DUNNING.
HAMILTON ODELL.
JOHN E. PARSONS.
DANIEL J. HOLDEN.
HECTOR M. HITCHINGS.
WM. D. BARBOUR.
ADAM CAMPBELL.
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L. D. BULKLEY.
CALDWELL R. BLAKEMAN.
W. B. ISHAM, JR.
ROBERT OLYPHANT.

THE CHURCH.

ACTS xiv : 23.—"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed."

THE service in which we are to engage to-day is one that brings before our minds, with peculiar distinctness, the idea of the Church as an organized body. This is a subject upon which, I fear, the notions of many Presbyterians at the present day are somewhat vague and confused, in spite of the fact that the Presbyterian doctrine on the subject is very clear and simple, and, at least to my mind, most Scriptural, beautiful, and satisfactory. If it were better understood it would be more admired; and if it were more consistently carried out it would be more warmly appreciated. In point of fact there

is nothing in Presbyterianism so excellent as its broad and high, orderly and liberal doctrine of the Church. For this reason, even at the risk of telling you what you know already, I propose to set it forth very briefly to-day.

Nor shall I forget, in so doing, that there are many persons worshipping and working with us who do not call themselves Presbyterians. It is one of the greatest privileges of our Church—to my mind it seems her very greatest honor and distinction among the many churches of our common Lord—that she can lawfully admit to her pulpit all ministers of Jesus Christ, in whatever church they may have been ordained, and receive to her communion all who accept the Christian religion, wherever and however they may have been baptized. You need no assurance that the minister who is your servant here for Christ's sake is no sectarian or denominationalist. By inheritance through many generations, and by education, and by voluntary allegiance, a Presbyterian, I

prize and will firmly maintain my birth-right; but at the same time I profess my higher and larger allegiance to the Church Universal and to Christ its only Head, and I welcome here to our fellowship and sacraments all, of every name, who call upon the Lord out of a pure heart and are willing to dwell with us in peace and love and good works. Your influence in enlarging the bounds of our brotherhood and the spirit of our charity is blessed; your co-operation in carrying on the simple and beautiful tasks of Christian benevolence is invaluable. And I am sure that you will not be weakened but rather strengthened in the sense of your right and your welcome in uniting with us, by a consideration of the theory of the Church and the form of government under which we are living and laboring together.

Let us recognize, then, at the outset, that the Church of Christ exists under two distinct, but not separate, characters. Just as there is in man an invisible life and a visible life: so

there is an invisible church which is spiritually united to Christ, and a visible church "which is externally united to Him for the sake of the other." The illustration is not to be pushed too far, as if it were a definition. But the fact of which it is the symbol is to be recognized. And so our standards teach in their doctrine of the Church.

I. "The Catholic or Universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole body of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the Head thereof." (Conf. of Faith, Chapter xxv., Sec. 1.) The concluding clause of this sentence guards us against any misunderstanding of the word elect. It includes all the objects of redemption, all who ever have, or ever will, come to God through His free grace in Jesus Christ; the sheep that are not of this fold, who shall hear and follow the Shepherd; the multitudes who shall come from the East and the West, and the North and the South, and sit down with the chosen people in the Kingdom of God.

This truth of the Church invisible implies two things: First, a denial of the theory that a merely formal profession of Christianity or acceptance of its sacraments can secure salvation; second, an assertion of the truth that the wideness of God's mercy extends far beyond the bounds of any outward organization, and even beyond the reach of the outward means of grace. It is true that apart from the preaching of the Gospel and the fellowship of the invisible Church there is "no ordinary possibility of salvation"; but it is also true that the grace of God is extraordinary, and worketh when and where and how He pleaseth. Dr. Charles Hodge says: "We know from the Bible itself that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth God is accepted of Him. No one doubts that it is in the power of God to call whom He pleases from among the heathen, and to reveal to them enough truth to secure their salvation." This truth is even more fully and beautifully set forth in the best creed that this century has pro-

duced, the Articles of the Faith of the Presbyterian Church of England. "We acknowledge one Holy Catholic Church, the innumerable company of saints of every age and nation, who being united by the Holy Spirit to Christ their head, are one body in Him, and have communion with their Lord and with one another." This is our doctrine of the unseen, spiritual, countless, eternal Church of God.

II. Equally clear and broad is the teaching of our standards in regard to the visible Church. "The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel, consists of all those throughout the world, that profess the true religion, together with their children. * * * * Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by His own presence and spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto." (Conf. of Faith, Chapter xxv., Secs. 2, 3.) How rich

and strong and generous is the doctrine of this passage. Let your thoughts work upon it.

1. It asserts the divine authority and effectual power which the Church, as a channel, conveys from Christ to men.

2. It gives the marks and signs of the true Church, which are four: The confession of Jesus Christ as the Head; a divinely appointed and ordained ministry; the faithful preaching of the Gospel; and the due administration of the sacraments. This is our quadrilateral—if we may borrow the word used by our Episcopal brethren at the Lambeth Conference—on which we offer fellowship to all other churches who walk according to this rule, and in the spirit of which we acknowledge them as true and living branches of the Holy Church Universal.

3. It embraces within church membership all who profess the true religion, or as the English Presbyterian Articles express it, all "who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, together with their children."

Nothing could be simpler, nothing could be more liberal than this. It welcomes all such as Christ welcomed while He was on earth. It is the charter of Christian liberty and the bond of Christian brotherhood. We thank God that no other law or test of communion can rightfully be proclaimed within our Church.

4. Finally, this passage declares the unity of this organized, authoritative, broad Church visible, throughout the world.

> Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
> Her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;
> One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
> And to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

It is into this Church we are baptized; it is in this Church that we commune, not as Presbyterians or Episcopalians or Methodists, but as Christians. This is the only doctrine that can rightfully be taught by those who are true and loyal to our standards. In the real sense, in the broad sense, in the best sense, we are Churchmen.

This, then, is our faith in regard to the Church Universal, visible and invisible, and it entitles us to say in the words of the Apostles' Creed, which is a part of our constitution and authorized for use in our public worship, "We believe in the Holy Catholic Church and in the Communion of Saints."

III. We go on now to consider briefly the order and government of our own branch of the visible Church. The doctrine of our constitution is very plain and sensible. It says:

"As this immense multitude cannot meet together in one place to hold communion or to worship God, it is reasonable and warranted by Scripture examples that they should be divided into many particular churches. A particular church consists of a number of professing Christians, with their offspring, voluntarily associated together for divine worship and godly living, agreeably to the Holy Scriptures, and submitting to a certain form of government." (Form of Government, Chapter ii., Secs. 3, 4.)

Observe carefully what is contained in these wise words. They teach that the existence of particular churches is a consequence of natural causes; it is the result, not of a theory, but of a condition. They teach the voluntary principle of organization, that Christians may and should associate themselves together in the liberty of conscience, rather than in mere obedience to external authority, civil or ecclesiastical. They teach that there may be different forms of church government and worship. They do not imply that there is any one form which is fully revealed in the Word, and to which all Christians must conform on pain of being branded as schismatics and heretics. On the contrary, they proceed upon the principle of growth, and adaptation to the differences of human character and the changing conditions of life, for the promotion of the two great ends of the Church's existence, which are divine worship and godly living.

There cannot be found anywhere in our standards a theory of *jure divino* Presbyterian-

ism, which teaches that ours is the only lawful and scriptural form. The utmost that is claimed for our order is that it is reasonable and profitable and conformable to Holy Scripture; and to this we may add, in America, that it is in harmony with our national institutions and with the spirit of our country. There is certainly no immodesty or bigotry in this claim, but at the same time it is large and dignified enough to command the respect of thoughtful people.

The general principle of our church government is that of a representative organization of the whole body of believers, under Christ the sole and sovereign Head. On the divine side, therefore, our Church is a Kingdom, of which the Lord Jesus is the only King. On the human side it wears the character of a spiritual Republic, in which the authority of the Church is exercised by the people through their chosen representatives. This differs from the democratic character of Congregationalism, in which the executive power is retained in the

hands of the brotherhood without representation, and each separate congregation is a law unto itself. It differs from the oligarchic character of Episcopacy, in which the executive power resides in a small and distinct order of diocesan bishops. It differs from the imperial character of the Papacy, which makes one man the infallible head of the Church and the vicegerent of Christ on earth. I should not wish the word to be used as a definition; but as a general description it is fair enough to call the Presbyterian Church a constitutional Republic, under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Spiritual King. The authority does not come from the people: it is communicated to the people by Christ, and exercised by them, under His laws, through their chosen officers. This is a form of organization which seems to combine in beautiful harmony the two great principles of the largest liberty and the firmest order. It should commend itself especially to every educated and loyal American. But admirable as it is in theory we

must never forget that its success in practice depends in a peculiar sense upon the intelligence, liberality and loyalty of the people, and upon the unselfishness, honesty and fidelity of the men who are chosen to represent them. A corrupt, disorderly, or partisan republic is as base and worthless as a pure, law-abiding, and liberal republic is glorious and useful.

There are three distinct and excellent features in the order of our Church which we ought to understand and remember.

1. There is a divinely sanctioned and commissioned ministry, endowed with equal rights and powers. This order of men does not originate in human wisdom or expediency. It comes from Christ, through His Apostles, who ordained presbyters in every church and committed sacred duties to their charge. We believe in the Apostolic succession. Not in a succession of Apostles, for the mission of the twelve included peculiar powers, such as the gift of miracles and the authority to testify as eye-witnesses to the resurrection of Christ,

which cannot be perpetual. But we believe in a succession from the Apostles, in a historic episcopate, not diocesan but pastoral, which runs back through a long line of ordained presbyters to the very men whom the Lord Christ chose to found and organize His Church. We know that there have been periods of history in which this succession has been more or less pure, and intervals of confusion through which it is not easy to trace; but we can trace it at least as well as any other church; and we can appeal with confidence to the ministry which has produced such men as Knox and Baxter, Chalmers and Guthrie and Macleod, Whitefield and Witherspoon and Rodgers, Livingstone and Mackay and Calhoun; Gardiner Spring and James W. Alexander and Howard Crosby, and may I not add also the name of my beloved father, Henry J. Van Dyke, as entitled by the best of all proofs —the evidence of the Spirit and the fruit of good works—to rank in the succession of the glorious company of the Apostles.

2. The second feature of our church order is the principle of government by an ascending and closely-linked series of representative bodies. Our constitution says that "this is expedient and agreeable to Scripture," but at the same time it says, "in full consistency with this belief, we embrace, in the spirit of charity, those Christians who differ from us, in opinion and practice on these subjects." (Form of Government, Chapter viii., Sec. 1.)

Let me try to explain in few words the system which is thus modestly and with dignity commended to our approval.

The first of these representative bodies is the Session, to which the executive power in each congregation is committed. It consists of the pastor and as many ruling elders as may be chosen by the people.

The second is the Presbytery, which consists of all the ministers and one ruling elder from each congregation within a certain district. It has the general oversight and charge of those ministers and churches of whom it is

composed, and is charged with the duty of devising common measures for the promotion of religion and morality.

The third is the Synod, which is a convention of bishops and elders within a larger district, including at least three Presbyteries. Thus the Synod of New York, which is one of the largest and most liberal in our Church, embraces twenty-six Presbyteries. It meets once a year, and each Presbytery is represented in it by a number of ministerial and lay delegates, in proportion to its size.

The fourth is the General Assembly, which represents in one body all the particular churches of the denomination. It meets once a year, and is made up of an equal delegation of bishops and elders from each Presbytery in proportion to its size.

You will observe the symmetry of this order, and that its efficiency depends upon the maintenance of all its parts in the due balance of power. You will observe that it is essentially representative. You will observe also that

while the General Assembly is the largest of these bodies, the Presbytery is the true unit of government and *fons potestatis*. For not only has it the oversight of the churches within its bounds, but it determines the membership of the Synod and the General Assembly, and has the sole legislative power in the Church. No resolution of Synod or General Assembly has any legal force to amend or add to the constitutional rules of the Church unless it is approved in writing by a majority of the Presbyteries; nor can any change be made in the Confession of Faith except by the vote of at least two-thirds of the Presbyteries. Every conservative man, who appreciates the blessings of a firm and stable law, must admire this safeguard against rash changes, and every liberal man, who loves the blessings of liberty, must be thankful for this restraint upon the tyranny of centralized power.

3. The third feature in our church order which is characteristic, though it has been adopted in recent times by many other churches

who have recognized its value, is the election in every congregation of lay officers, as representatives of the people. These are the elders, whose duties are to exercise discipline, to receive members into the church, to concert measures for promoting the spiritual interests of the congregation, and to elect delegates to the higher judicatories—and the deacons, whose duty is to take care of the poor, according to the example of the early Church, given in Acts vi. In the election of these officers all the members of the church, male and female, are entitled to vote, according to the mode most approved and in use in that congregation: and they are to be ordained and installed in their office by the minister, with the consent of the people. In addition to these officers most of the Presbyterian congregations have adopted the custom of electing Trustees, who have the important duty of taking care of the temporal interests of the church.

Certain vows and promises are required of the elders and deacons at their ordination,

which are not required of the members of the church. I will state these in order and explain them concisely.

(*a*) They are to profess their faith in "the Bible as the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice." This means simply what it says: that they are to accept its teachings in regard to the things which man is to believe concerning God and the duties which God requires of man (Shorter Catechism, 3), and to acknowledge the divine authority of the Holy Spirit, speaking in the Scriptures, as the Supreme Judge in matters of religion. (Conf. of Faith, i., 10.)

(*b*) They are also to "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." This has never been understood to imply the acceptance of every particular doctrine which is stated in the Confession, but only those which are taught in the Holy Scriptures, and which are essential and necessary. The Confession certainly does

contain these doctrines, however much beside them it may contain.

As to the distinction between the essential and the non-essential I will quote John Calvin: "Some (doctrines) are so necessary to be "known that all must hold them to be fixed "and undoubted as the proper essentials of "religion—for instance that God is one; that "Christ is God, and the Son of God; and that "our salvation depends on the mercy of God; "and the like."

As to the system of doctrine I will quote Howard Crosby: "The system of doctrine "includes, simply, the lost condition of man "in original sin, and the grace of God in "Christ, the eternal Son and the sacrificial "Lamb, as the only salvation."

(*c*) The elders and deacons are also to approve the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in these United States.

(*d*) They are to accept the office to which they have been chosen, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof. This is a

promise in which they will need the grace of God, only to be obtained by prayer, and freely given to all who ask for it.

(*e*) They are to promise, finally, to "study the peace, unity, and purity of the Church." This means the earnest consecration of the heart and life to the promotion of Christian brotherhood, Gospel truth, and Godly living, by following in word and deed the teaching of Jesus, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light, and who is the only and eternal Prince of Peace. This is a promise of which there is great need at the present day, and if it is honestly made and faithfully kept by the brethren whom you have chosen as elders and deacons, and who are to be inducted into their offices to-day, it will bring down a blessing upon this Church. We shall feel the power of the simple Gospel of Christ to make men good and kind and to bind their hearts together. And so, though the storms of theological controversy rage round about us, "in quietness and confidence shall be your

strength, in rest and in returning ye shall be saved."

You understand, then, dearly beloved, our doctrine of the Church, and how it unites us to all true Christians, at the same time that it strengthens us in loyalty to the order which we have chosen and approved, and encourages us to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. You see, also, the solemn and beautiful nature of the service of this day, and how it carries our thoughts back, through a long succession of like services, to the days when Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church.

I pray you, now, to let the closing words of the text sink deep into your hearts—"They commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed." And who was that Lord? It was none other than Jesus Christ.

Christ is the light of all Scripture. Christ is the life of the Church. All her authority, and power, and honor, and peace, come from Him. Her officers are simply His servants,

and your servants for His sake. Her members are simply His friends and followers. The true Church is that in which He dwells. The best Church is that which most faithfully does His work in the world and most lovingly makes Him known to men. We write His name and sign above every name upon our Church; and our great prayer to God is that He shall enable us to bear it more worthily and make and keep this *a true Church of Christ.*